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DVD Movie Guide: news review

Paramount Studios presents

The Pentagon Papers (2003)

"For me, as an American, democracy is sacred—something worth fighting for. If my own greatest act of patriotism was treason, then so be it."

- Daniel Ellsberg (James Spader)

Review By: Matt Peterson 

Published: February 15, 2004

Stars: James Spader, Paul Giamatti, Claire Forlani, Alan Arkin

Director: Rod Holcomb

MPAA Rating: R for (war images, brief sexuality)

Run Time: 01h:31m:40s

Release Date: February 17, 2004

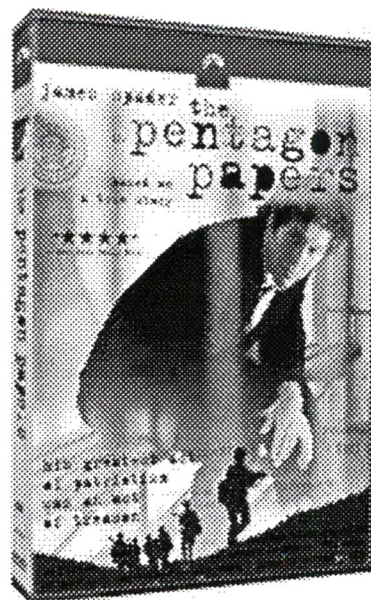
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Genre: drama

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Style Grade	Substance Grade	Image Transfer Grade	Audio Transfer Grade	Extras Grade	Member Comments
A-	B+	B	B	D-	0

DVD Review

Cover-up; Intelligence; Allegiance; Freedom of the Press; Hero; Traitor. Words and phrases like these barrage the viewer during the opening credits. Briskly edited nighttime shots of clandestine activities open the film, emoting the feel of a dark thriller. In many ways, this film could be classified in such a genre. However, it is more about the morality struggle of one man: Daniel Ellsberg. He would make a decision that would change the face of America, and fully reveal the truly tragic nature of the war in Vietnam. During a scene at a drug-infested party, Ellsberg sits idly, staring off into space. Friend Anthony Russo shoots him with an old color Super 8 camera, focusing tightly on his depraved face. *"Never thought I'd see that look on your face,"* he mutters. *"What?"* replies Ellsberg. *"Doubt."*

Daniel Ellsberg, played with bravado by James Spader, grew up with ambition. He graduated from Harvard law, served in the Marine Corps, and simply loved his country. He wanted nothing more than to be one of the president's men—to serve and uphold the democratic system he cherished. To the detriment of his family life, he pursued this goal fully, beginning with a job at the Rand Corporation. A paper on his cold, calculated approach to foreign affairs, which frequently called for decisive and absolute military action, attracted the attention of the Pentagon. In short order, he began working for the Department of Defense as an intelligence analyst. Vietnam was heating up, and he was exactly where he wanted to be.

As Ellsberg became immersed in his work, inconsistencies began popping up. American vs. Viet Cong casualties

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were grossly miscalculated; intelligence reports on the same event from two reliable sources would contradict each other. Ellsberg became concerned, unlike his superiors who seemingly wanted the war effort to look more successful than it was, and he took it upon himself to clear away the fog. Events reached critical mass back at the Rand Corporation, where Ellsberg received the secret 40+ volume, 7000-page report on America's involvement in Vietnam, spanning several administrations: The truth was being kept from the public—what began as noble efforts to squelch communism had been morphed by political machinations and covert activities into a series of deceptions. To reveal such information, even though it was simply a history of events, would be deemed as treason. Would the pursuit of truth not be considered an act of true patriotism? As all he believed and invested in began crumbling down, a difficult decision was made.

The Pentagon Papers, while delving into the events surrounding the reveal of these history-making documents, ultimately speaks to our responsibility to the truth. It is easy for a review like this to degenerate into a politically flavored opinion piece. I will not attempt to be political, but to be frank about morality. What is the line between what information must be made secret, and what must be shared publicly? Certainly, there is information that would threaten national security if revealed, but in the case of the Pentagon Papers, mistakes and deceptions can be covered up under the guise of protecting America. Such an abuse of our system of government is clearly morally wrong, especially when lives are being sacrificed to maintain such a false façade. Some may feel this situation applies to our current situation in Iraq. I'll let you be the judge.

The telefilm, produced for the FX network, is a fine, stylish, and appropriately dramatic depiction of these important actual events. Occasionally, Spader appears too heroic, and his opposition, too evil. There was clear guilt on both sides of the equation. James Spader delivers a fine performance, as usual, perfectly capturing Ellsberg's initial determination to uphold national policy, and his consequential decay that would ultimately lead to his decision. Claire Forlani plays his love interest, Patricia Marx. Her role is a bit weaker, but ultimately becomes a strong partner for Spader in Ellsberg's darkest hours. Two top-shelf actors, Alan Arkin and Paul Giamatti are grossly underused here. Arkin plays Harry Rowan, an executive at Rand, acting as a powerful reality check for Ellsberg. Giamatti's Anthony Russo benefits from the actor's quirky side, seen in a different form in **American Splendor**. He brings great depth to his character, who turns from Rand employee to political radical.

Stylistically, this film excels. Director Rod Holcomb delivers a strong, immediate vérité style to most of the film, accentuated in the Vietnam scenes, which are seen in the form of grainy, bleached, bypassed images, similar to Matthew Libatique's work on **Tigerland**. Segments from Giamatti's Super 8 camera provide another excellent visual contrast in certain scenes. There is some great editing, as well— something necessary for long segments of conveying documented information. Make no mistake: this is no **All the President's Men**. However, it is a strong film that is worth your time.

In the end, Ellsberg's beliefs never changed. His hawk-to-dove transformation was ultimately in the pursuit of the same thing: the preservation of what he believes America stands for. Although the people involved on both sides of the conflict were not as black and white as the film may want you to believe, there is a clear division between who is more right and who is more wrong. Sometimes sacrifices are necessary to uphold what is morally right and what is universally good. This is one of America's founding principles.

Rating for Style: A-

Rating for Substance: B+

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Image Transfer

	One
Aspect Ratio	1.33:1 - Full Frame
Original Aspect Ratio	yes
Anamorphic	no

Image Transfer Review: The picture quality is decent, but not outstanding. Paramount has delivered the film in its original broadcast ratio of 1.33:1. Colors are accurate and contrast is good, preserving the original color scheme of the film. The grainy, blown-out colors in the Vietnam sequences (shot on either 16mm or maybe even 8mm) are accurately captured. There is some minor motion blurring and digital artifacts, but overall, this is a decent transfer.

Image Transfer Grade: B

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Audio Transfer

	Language	Remote Access
DS 2.0	English	no

Audio Transfer Review: The Dolby 2.0 track is a fine stereo mix, but contains no surround information. This is disappointing for such a recent film. At times, dialogue is hard to hear and can sound somewhat harsh.

Audio Transfer Grade: B

Disc Extras

Static menu
Scene Access with 16 cues
Packaging: Amaray
Picture Disc
1 Disc
1-Sided disc(s)
Layers: single

Extras Review: There are absolutely no extras—not even English subtitles. It would have been nice to have a full documentary on the real Ellsberg, and/or an audio commentary, to provide some historical context. There is a great epilogue at the end of the film that gives us a glimpse of what could have been.

Extras Grade: D-

Final Comments

A powerful film that deserves attention, **The Pentagon Papers** features a strong performance by James Spader. Its depiction of the controversy surrounding the release of secret documents is more cut and dry than reality, but this does not destroy its message. The truth is paramount to political meanderings, and the ambitions of men willing to sacrifice innocents. Tragically, good intentions can easily be perverted into horrible fallacies.

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